

“Welcome In”

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September 9, 2007

Psalm 139

I want to express my gratitude for the wonderful music that we have heard this morning. It's truly a gift to be able to preach following this beautiful music. Gary, we are so grateful for all that you bring to this community.

Please pray with me. O God, we give you thanks for another hour, another day, another season lying before us with untold possibility. We are grateful that we do not walk the path alone. Help us to know what you would have us do. Grant us your wisdom. Open our ears, that we might hear your voice anew in this place. Amen.

Last Sunday, as I was frantically posting signs by classroom doors in preparation for this first week of Sunday school, Noel Nickle met me at the door of a classroom with a grin. “Amanda, do you know what the most exciting day of the year is, aside from Christmas?” she asked. No, I did not. “The first day of Sunday school class,” she replied.

Well, here we are folks, living and laughing together on the 2nd most exciting day of the year. I believe this is a day worthy of celebration. This week marks the beginning of a new leg on our journey together. This Sunday is the day we embark on another year of learning and teaching, listening and storytelling, discerning truth and honoring the questions of faith. In the course of this year, children will be delighted by the twists and turns of the stories of our Christian faith. Some of them will ask questions that rattle the cages of Sunday school teachers and parents alike. It will be a year of talking together, eating together, playing together and praying together. Rest assured, there will be conflict. Challenges will rise up on the path before us. We will be tempted to let go of one another's hands. Such is the mystery of becoming community all over again. Check it out in the Bible, there's never a dull moment to community life.

My friends, the year lies in wait before us. This is a day worthy of celebration. And because we have so much richness in our service this morning, I was instructed to preach a shorter sermon. I think somebody picked the wrong preacher for the occasion. But you have my word that I have closely scrutinized all that I intend to say this morning. And I ask you to forgive my God given propensity for wordiness.

I am struck this morning by the passion and liveliness that our children bring to our community of faith. I was at a Holy Ground board meeting last month on the very day that school was back in session, and Bob Smith, a community leader who serves on our board, had this to say: our children awaken us to the seasons. I think he's right. What would the fall be without children climbing onto yellow school buses, diving into piles of dehydrated leaves, or running around red-cheeked with the crisp autumn wind? Our children awaken us to the seasons and also to the rhythms of the Christian seasons. As we recount the stories of ancestors, our children's questions challenge us to live in the tension between already and not yet, the tension between the past and the unfolding mist of the present. They energize us to greet each day with the thrill of discovery dripping from our tongues. Our children mark new seasons with growing pains and ripening gifts. They savor the wonder of this world. Our children teach us that God is an exuberant

Creator, and we are indeed wonderfully made. I am thankful for our children this morning.

As Minister of Christian Education, I often find myself weighing and considering what wisdom we ought to impart to our children. I have pondered the theological and spiritual truths that might equip them for the journey ahead. What is it that our children ought to know about the Holy One? What can we tell them of God's ways in this world? How do we put all of this in conversation with their daily lives? I have considered these things with curiosity and deliberate intention.

But this is my first foray into the Christian Education year as a mother. This is the first time I have asked how I will tell these stories to my child, how I will tell him of God's love and new mercies each day. It's a new season for me. One gift of pregnancy I remember well is that your hands always have a resting place when you go to God in prayer. And through the uncertain months of pregnancy, one constant was the prayer that I offered up to God, like a billow of incense, on behalf of my child.

I prayed, in essence, Psalm 139. When I considered my deepest hope for him, I prayed that God's presence would encircle this little one with a fire like warmth. I prayed that he would know he is never alone. I prayed that he would understand the psalmist's cry, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast."¹ I prayed that one day Myles would know these words for himself.

And with my hands on my belly, I prayed incessantly that my child would know the psalmist's truth, a truth essential for a well lived life: I prayed that he would know that he is beautifully and wonderfully made. I prayed that I might be blessed to witness the unfolding of his gifts, without getting too much in the way. I prayed that one day he might utter words like these to his Creator: "It was you who formed my inward parts. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am beautifully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works, that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty are your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them—they are more than the grains of sand. I come to the end—I am still with you."²

The prayer of the psalmist remains my prayer—not just for my child, but for all our children. Because whether you are a birth parent or a grandparent, whether you are a godparent or an adoptive parent, whether you are a treasured aunt, uncle, or beloved friend—whether you are a parent or no parent at all—the children among us belong to our community of faith. We are the ones responsible for their faith formation in this place. We are the ones who have been called to welcome in the children, to let them come to Jesus and not to hinder them. We are the ones charged with healing their hurts, not of our own power, but by pointing toward the one who speaks good news to the poor, the one who brings release to our captive places, the one who helps us to see anew where we had been blind, the one who frees the places in us that are weighed down by

¹ Psalm 139:7-10

² Psalm 139:13-18

oppression. The Spirit of God is upon us. We are the ones who have been anointed to bear witness to the God of love, the God of forgiveness, the God of hope. It is my prayer that our children will catch a glimpse of God in this place. It is my prayer that together we will encounter the Holy One and emerge revived and transformed. This is my hope for our year ahead.

Psalm 139 contains some of the most precious images of intimacy with God. The psalmist strings together words like fresh water pearls, varied in hue and shape, pregnant with a melting beauty. For some of us, this psalm is like an old friend who arrives on our doorstep at just the right hour. Psalm 139 is a balm for our world wearied souls.

But then we get to verse 19. It would have been shorter and more convenient this morning to just go with the lectionary text, Psalm 139:1-18 and leave it at that. That is the text that was read for us this morning, and that is the text that we find in our New Century Hymnal. After all, why do the biblical authors test us so incessantly...can't we read just one chapter that we can wholeheartedly stand behind, one chapter that doesn't raise hackles or eyebrows? Ah, but the joy of theology is meeting the sharp curve in the road when our certainty flies out the window in the face of unfamiliar switchbacks. And so we have the rest of the psalm to grapple with. We are invited to wrestle with phrases like "perfect hate," and concepts suggesting that those who don't embrace our God are simply wicked.

What can we say about those parts of our sacred text that trouble the theological waters? What do we tell our children about portions of the Bible that seem to fly in the face of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection? So many Christian churches wear the title of "literalist" as a badge of spiritual integrity. Those of us who do not claim to interpret the Bible literally must be sliding down a slippery slope to God knows where.

I believe we honor the Bible best when we welcome its nuances and revel in its textures. When we place the two creation accounts in the opening chapters of Genesis side by side or place the four gospel accounts side by side and ask why we have differing, even contradictory, versions of the same events. What could the biblical editors have possibly hoped we would do with these "inaccuracies"? Perhaps in their wisdom, they knew we'd need more than one perspective on the journey.

As Christians, the Bible is our story. It reminds us that we are a part of something much bigger than ourselves. The truth we look for in the Bible is not necessarily a scientific truth or an historical truth or a literal truth, though the Bible has some of each. The truth we desperately dig for in the Bible is a theological truth—a truth about the human condition, about the relationship between God and humanity, about the ways God shows up in our world. In searching out theological truth, we consider many things. Is the excerpt poetry or prose? Is it law or narrative? We consider the author and the cultural context. We ask children, youth, and adults to try on the sandals of each person in the story, considering which voices are heard and which voices are silenced. We connect these stories to our lives and welcome the difficult questions that emerge.

And so I will tell you that a few questions emerge for me at the end of Psalm 139. Questions like, how can hate ever be perfect? Questions like how is the instruction to hate in tension with Jesus' call to love our enemies? Questions like how do we love our enemies in an age of terrorism? Good, tough, questions.

Years ago, I heard a sermon on a story from the gospel of Luke preached by Dr. Kenneth Samuel, a gifted UCC pastor and preacher. I carry the tape of that sermon in my

car and listen to it whenever I need a good revival. In this story, Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem and he goes straight through Samaria. Now you may recall that Samaritans and Jews did not mix in Jesus' day. Dr. Samuel puts it like this: "Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. Didn't like them, didn't trust them, wouldn't eat with them, wouldn't touch anything that had been touched by a Samaritan, wouldn't even be found talking to a Samaritan." But Jesus, being who he was, determined he would not travel the long, circuitous road around the Samaritan region, as most Jews did, but would travel directly through it. Not only that, he sent his disciples ahead to request lodging for the night. They did so, and were denied.

Faced with rejection, the disciples got a little hot under the collar. You see, most of us do not deal "wisely or successfully" with rejection. Dr. Samuel suggests that perhaps we have not paid close enough attention to how Jesus himself handled rejection. And so, the disciples became angry when they were denied lodging in a Samaritan village. And they implored Jesus, asking, "do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?"³ They asked this referring to a story in 1 Kings in which Elijah did exactly that, calling down fire from heaven which promptly burned up two companies of soldiers.

Dr. Samuel notes that the disciples, like good disciples, were simply quoting the Bible. Their request, to do what Elijah had done, was biblically based. Perhaps they were literalists. And yet Jesus rebuked them, saying "you do not know what manner of spirit you are of."⁴ Dr. Samuel contends, "they were following the right one, but following the right one with the wrong spirit. They were reading the right scripture, but reading the right scripture with the wrong spirit. And it's always a dangerous thing to try to read and interpret and apply the word of God with the wrong spirit."

I convey this excerpt from Dr. Samuel's sermon to illustrate a crucial point for our Christian Education journey in the coming year: spiritual growth requires of us the right spirit. Presence and time do not suffice as ingredients for spiritual growth. Spiritual growth requires that we come into this place with ready spirits so that we might participate in the spirit of the story, the spirit of the God of the Bible, the spirit that Jesus spoke of.

I believe that a part of this spirit is Jesus' invitation to love our enemies. To pray for those who persecute us, to bless and not to curse them. When Jesus' shook the dust off his sandals in that Samaritan village that rejected him and moved on to another village, he must have known that hate harms the ones who harbor it most. But oh how we want to hate. Like the psalmist, we are sometimes convinced that there is a perfect, holy hate justified by the obvious wickedness (or ignorance or cruelty) of the one we despise.

And this is a particularly difficult piece in our culture, a culture which has lost its ability to respond creatively to violence. A culture which values militarism above dialogue. A culture which wants a quick fix to our grief. A culture which firmly believes that technology should make human pain obsolete.

In a violent world, we often want to act out of the hardness in our hearts, but Jesus offers a gentle rebuke. "you do not know what manner of spirit you are of." And so this morning, as we embark together on a new year of Christian Education and arts and

³ Luke 9:54

⁴ Luke 9:55

worship, a new year of hospitality and stewardship and play...I invite you to consider not just our sacred text, but the spirit of the one we follow. It's a spirit of reconciliation. A spirit of hope. A spirit of love.

My friends, I welcome you into this new season like much anticipated guests. You are the ones we've been waiting for. You are the stranger worthy of extravagant hospitality. You are the beloved community. You are Christ's own body, re-membered in this place. As we embark, God goes with us, behind us and before us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.